

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 329FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
Winter 1986/1987

Edward Schumacher

## THE UNITED STATES AND LIBYA

EXCERPTED

U.S.-Libyan relations have come "pretty darn close" to war, Secretary of State George Shultz said recently. In 1981, just four months into office, President Reagan closed Libya's embassy in Washington, citing Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi's support for international terrorism. Shortly afterward, U.S. navy jets shot down two Libyan warplanes after being fired upon by them. American pressure reached dramatic intensity last April 15 with the bombing raid on Qaddafi's headquarters and home in Tripoli. Later, some officials sought to destabilize Qaddafi with deliberate plants of disinformation.

If the ouster of Qaddafi has not been the Administration's avowed goal, it clearly has become a virtual obsession. "If a coup takes place, that is all to the good," said Shultz in April, in a rare example of an American cabinet official in effect advocating the overthrow of another government. At the core of the Administration's pressure on Qaddafi is a belief that, by dealing with him, the United States will lead the Western world in dealing a fatal blow to the promoters of international terrorism.

\* \* \* \* \*

III

The United States' disenchantment with Qaddafi did not start with President Reagan. Shortly after the 1969 coup the Nixon Administration blocked the sale of 12 C-130 military cargo planes to Libya. Arms, technology and trade embargoes were progressively extended by the Ford and Carter Administrations. Now little more than humanitarian and journalistic contacts are allowed under the terms of a January 1986 executive order requiring all American citizens to leave Libya.

The Administration deliberately set out to punish Qaddafi in March 1986 when ships of the U.S. Sixth Fleet crossed the "Line of Death" drawn by Qaddafi in the Gulf of Sidra, which he claims as territorial waters. The claim has little historical basis or international recognition, but American officials have admitted that their intrusion was designed less to uphold international law than to provoke Qaddafi. It did. The Libyans attacked; the Sixth Fleet responded by sinking at least two Libyan patrol boats and hitting an anti-aircraft missile site. The Libyan regime has never clarified how many Libyans died in the confrontation, but a memorial list posted inside the Benghazi naval barracks listed 72 drowned sailors; some Libyan naval officers have put the number much higher. No Americans were killed.

The April 15, 1986, air raid on Tripoli and Benghazi brought the hostilities to a peak. The raid came in announced retaliation for the death of an American soldier in a bomb blast at a Berlin discotheque. The Americans mounted an extraordinary operation in which planes flying from air fields in Britain were coordinated with others flying from carriers in the Mediterranean. The Libyan regime said that 36 civilians and one soldier were killed, but estimates based on burials around the country put the number of Libyan deaths, mostly military, between 50 and 100. One American F-111 jet was shot down and its two pilots killed. Eight bomb craters stretched out about 300 yards from just in front of the colonel's house to the front of his office building. Qaddafi's wife and two of his sons were injured, and an infant girl taken in by the family was reportedly killed. Qaddafi, in his underground bunker at the time of the bombing, escaped unharmed.

The Reagan Administration has since continued to apply more subtle military and covert pressure in hopes of provoking a Libyan coup. In addition to Sixth Fleet flybys and ship maneuvers within radar range off the Libyan coast, the Administration reportedly sponsored a disinformation campaign,

outlined in an August 1986 memorandum to the President from his national security adviser, John M. Poindexter. False or exaggerated reports of internal dissent and opposition were advocated in order to unsettle Qaddafi psychologically. President Reagan said in a news conference that he wanted Qaddafi to "go to bed every night wondering what we might do."

Over the years the Central Intelligence Agency has maintained contacts with Libyan exiles and internal opposition groups. It has even flirted with backing coup attempts, though there is no public knowledge that it has ever attempted a coup operation. The CIA has also long been spreading rumors, or disinformation, but the Poindexter memo suggested a more directed and coordinated effort.

What has been the effect of this long record of American military, economic, diplomatic and covert pressures? Each had different short-term and long-term results. But the goals of stopping terrorism and overthrowing Qaddafi have not been met.

IV

Qaddafi was still in power long after the bombing raid. Worse, the air raid, the jolt designed to provoke a coup, proved to have the opposite immediate effect of strengthening him vis-à-vis his rivals inside the government.

The Libyan government is so tightly closed and its officials so fearful or hostile about speaking that it is difficult to establish the details of internal political maneuverings with certainty. American officials complain that the amount of intelligence on Libya even inside the CIA is meager. Rumors abound, the wildest often repeated by diplomats and reported to their home governments.

\* \* \* \* \*

VIII

So what should the United States do about Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi? The Administration's obsession with overthrowing him is not the answer.

Another direct attack risks alienating Western Europe. It also risks provoking a genuine Soviet-Libyan alliance. Pushing Qaddafi toward Soviet protection hardly serves America's greater interests. Soviet bases in Libya would present a threat to NATO, as well as expand Soviet influence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, all vital areas of American interest.

Even short of forcing a Soviet-Libyan alliance, a second American attack without clear justification could force the Soviet Union into some kind of strong reaction, if for no other reason than to gain credibility in the Arab world.

American interests in Arab and Third World countries could also be damaged. Their reaction to the April air raid was minimal, in part because many countries, whatever their public pronouncements, saw that Qaddafi was playing with fire by directing terrorism against American targets. Obvious military bullying to overthrow Qaddafi, however, is not likely to meet with such a quiescent response. There is no such thing as a united Arab world, but there is an Arab brotherhood that resents outside bullying of one of their own. Even Egypt, the most anti-Qaddafi Arab state, has refused to join in American contingency plans to overthrow the Libyan.

Bombing is of marginal military value anyway. A massive operation was mounted and two American pilots died in April.

2

The political message was clear, but the actual military damage was minimal—little more than a handful of parked Libyan planes. Meanwhile, a number of civilians were killed as American bombs hit a Tripoli neighborhood. The best plans and latest technology can go awry in combat.

American zealotry to overthrow Qaddafi may thus bode failure—failure for U.S. policy in Europe, with the Soviets, and in the Arab and Third Worlds. It may also bode failure inside Libya itself. A coup brought about purposefully and clearly by American provocation stands to be counterproductive. Pro-American and possibly even moderate forces inside Libya would likely be discredited as American lackeys. Libya is filled with competing pro-Soviet, radical nationalistic and Muslim fundamentalist currents that are both anti-Qaddafi and anti-American. In the grab for power that is likely to follow the killing of Qaddafi, the moderates could very easily be branded as U.S. agents and lose out to forces inimical to U.S. interests.

All this is not to say that the United States should discard another military attack as a policy option. Should Libya commit an egregious terrorist attack against an American target, a second attack could be considered to deter further state terror. But the terrorist act must be egregious, and the proof of direct Libyan involvement must be so clear that American military retaliation appears justified to Western Europe, to the Soviet Union and to the Arab and Third Worlds. Otherwise, the risks outweigh the gains, which in any case are primarily short term.

This suggests that the best tools for dealing with Qaddafi are economic and diplomatic. The fortuitous drop in the world price of oil has undermined Qaddafi and his foreign adventurism more than the American air raid. The current economic and travel restrictions by the United States and Western Europe augment the effect, stirring a popular disenchantment in Libya which makes it almost certain that Qaddafi will sooner or later be overthrown. Such economic and diplomatic measures do not provoke European, Soviet or Arab opposition. They allow for moderate elements inside Libya to maneuver legitimately to replace Qaddafi.

The United States can help these moderate forces with covert aid. It can also help stir the cauldron of Libyan society and unsettle Qaddafi with such subtle psychological warfare as spreading rumors among Libyans. Overt lying by American officials via the press, however, goes beyond the pale. It under-

mines the credibility of both the press and the American government at a time when the truth about what is happening inside Libya is more than sufficient to discredit Qaddafi and his regime. The United States, in seeking to unsettle Qaddafi with military maneuvers, need not also act the part of a bellicose giant. American warships and planes need only be sighted by Libyan radar to have the effect of subtly turning up the heat inside the Libyan armed forces.

In October the British set an example of what the Europeans say is a more realistic and consistent policy than air raids in dealing with state terrorism—in this case, with Syria, a bigger and more politically powerful player than Libya in the terrorist game. The Thatcher government broke diplomatic relations with Syria after divulging what it said were telephone conversations proving the complicity of a Syrian ambassador in an attempt to blow up an Israeli airliner at the London airport. A British court convicted a Jordanian, recruited and trained by Syria, of putting a bomb in a bag belonging to his Irish girlfriend boarding the plane. The revelation and subsequent rupture in relations was internationally embarrassing to Syria, and has begun a process of what could be the diplomatic isolation of that country.

Toward Libya, what is called for is such a sense of measure. Qaddafi is his own worst enemy. He thrives on crisis, and in quiet times he grows bored. His increasing radicalization almost seems designed to keep his adrenalin flowing, but his radical vision is unworkable and doomed to failure. Qaddafi has set his regime on a course of self-destruction. The best American policy would be to turn off the rhetoric from Washington and let him go.

Edward Schumacher is bureau chief of *The New York Times* in Madrid.